“BECOMING LEAVES KIDS”: CULTURAL CREATION AND TRANSMISSION IN
ALTERNATIVELY EDUCATED HIGH SCHOOL YOUTH

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“People say “so what was the philosophy that Leaves of Learning was founded on?” Do unto others, and that’s pretty much it. It’s pretty simple. And people would say, you know, how interesting and different it is! and I would think “why?” I feel like the world should be like that, right?” -Founder

“I would describe the culture here as much more interested in learning than in grades...So you know, it’s a culture that’s really takes some risk, we’re a little experimental, you know, we take risks and hope that we’re pioneering a better thing, knowing we’re going to stumble along the way instead of playing it safe and do something that we know is already a deeply troubled model that is not producing what we’d like, so I think it’s kind of experimental. A little courageous maybe.” -Teacher

Abstract

In a world where socioeconomic barriers to education may seem insurmountable, creating a positive school climate may be a cheap and easy way to improve schools. Having a positive school climate can make students feel more included and engaged in
the learning process, reducing bullying, violence, mental disengagement, and other negative outcomes (Schultz et al., 2002). School climate is a nebulous, difficult thing to quantify, but can be loosely defined as the way a school feels to its participants. This thesis uses the case study of Leaves of Learning, an alternative school in Cincinnati, Ohio with a very distinctive and interesting school climate, to examine how school climate is created and reproduced. I interviewed students, teachers, and administrators to understand how members of the Leaves of Learning community create school climate, using both explicit and implicit modes of cultural transmission, the way culture moves within a society. I found that not only teachers and administrators but also students work to transmit the culture in self-aware and intentional ways. Students play an especially active role as shapers and creators of culture. Because the students are engaged and understand themselves as stakeholders in the culture, it creates a unified school and positive school climate. My findings suggest that if schools desire a positive school climate, they should work to build a culture that engages and prioritizes its students.

**Literature Review**

In the face of current physical, mental, and emotional dangers to students in schools, scholars are searching for a way to keep students both safe and engaged in their education. The problem is complicated, and students face a range of barriers to learning including violence, bullying, and disengagement. According to a 2013-14 nationally representative study from the National Center for Education Statistics, “65 percent of public schools reported that at least one violent incident occurred at school during the
2013–14 school year” and defined “violent incident” as “rape or attempted rape, sexual battery other than rape, robbery with or without a weapon, physical attack or fight with or without a weapon, and threat of physical attack with or without a weapon” (Gray & Lewis, 2015, p. 2). According to the same report, “student bullying was reported to occur at least once a month at 29 percent of elementary, 56 percent of middle, and 42 percent of high school/combined schools” (Gray & Lewis, 2015, p. 2). These hazards do not affect every student equally: minoritized students are more likely to drop out of school than white students, with a 2013 report by Civic Enterprises and the Everyone Graduates Center at the School of Education at Johns Hopkins University estimating that:

the four-year graduation rate is still 66 percent or less for African American students in 20 states and for Hispanic students in 16 states. For students from low-income families, graduation rates are at 66 percent or less in 18 states. For students with disabilities, graduation rates are below, often shockingly below, 66 percent in 30 states, and the same is true for limited English proficient students in 33 states. By contrast, there are no states in which the graduation rate for white students is below 66 percent and only four states in which it is 75 percent or less (p. 6).

For those with societally valued bodies, namely, white, abled and English-speaking, a high school diploma is easier to obtain than it is for those with less privilege.

Not all problems students face in pursuit of an education are as self-evidently dangerous as in-school crime, violence, or bullying, some are as insidious as mental disengagement. In a study that covered 13 high achieving public and private middle
schools, Pope (2010) found evidence of “disengagement and poor physical and mental health.” She found that

more than 70% of the high school students reported that they felt often or always stressed by their schoolwork, and many admitted to taking illegal stimulants to stay awake to study and complete the lengthy homework assignments each night. Students said that they wished their school experiences could be different, but they felt powerless. Some students dealt with this pressure by "opting out"—choosing not to do the work or only doing the absolute minimum necessary. Others became, in their words, "zombies"—memorizing and then "spitting back" large chunks of information without taking time to reflect or think critically about the content (Pope, p. 1).

Each of these issues is a threat to students, and a serious barrier to meaningful learning. Violence, disengagement, bullying and dropping out are each complex issues in their own right, and they interact to form a vortex that many students cannot escape. Because the core causes behind the failures of American public education are structural, such as inequality of race, class, gender, and socioeconomic status, it can be hard to see solutions that can be implemented without addressing these fundamental problems.

There is no single foolproof way to fix the public school system as a whole, and that is not what this thesis is proposing. However, according to Schulte et al (2002):

Many student problems have been associated with students' lack of belonging within a school, such as increased incidence of mental and physical illness, behavior problems, teen suicide, violence in schools, loneliness, delinquency,
withdrawal, aggression, drug and alcohol abuse, eating disorders, depression, dropouts, teen pregnancy, vandalism, diminished motivation, and poor academic performance (p. 118-119).

The lack of feelings of belonging as tied with negative outcomes prompts questions about creating cultures of belonging and finding ways to foster those important feelings. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009) studied school connectedness, which is intimately related to school climate, and found that “students who feel connected to school are more likely to have a number of positive health and academic outcomes” (p. 16). Examining what makes students feel comfortable, safe, and a sense of belonging is the purview of scholars of school climate. School climate is defined on the website of the National School Climate Center as:

A sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributing and satisfying life in a democratic society. This climate includes norms, values and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally and physically safe. People are engaged and respected. Students, families and educators work together to develop, live and contribute to a shared school vision. Educators model and nurture attitudes that emphasize the benefits and satisfaction gained from learning. Each person contributes to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment (p. 1).

Robinson, Leeb, Merrick and Forbes (2015) characterize positive school climates as “respectful school environments” (p.1492). They defined a respectful school
environment as “the shared attitudes and values among students, teachers, and administrators that shape interactions between and among these groups and define appropriate behavior and school norms” (p. 1492). Schulte et al. (2002) described positive school climate as a school’s “sense of community,” and held that it could be understood through “five ethical principles: respect for autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, justice, and fidelity” (p. 119).

Respectful school climate is also indicated by regard for the school’s physical environment, which includes whether the school property is defaced or destroyed through vandalism, and efforts around maintenance and establishment of a clean school environment (Bottiani et al., 2014; Planty & DeVoe, 2005). Other indicators of respectful school climate include bystander behavior e.g., student responsiveness to unsafe behaviors such as bullying (Low & Van Ryzin, 2014) and respect for diversity (Bottiani et al., 2014). While much of the focus in school climate literature is on positive school climates, negative school climates exist too, and are correlated with negative outcomes such as chronic absence, higher substance abuse, and greater intolerance of LGBT students (Van Eck et al., 2017; Sznitman et al., 2012; Kosciw et al., 2013).

Improving school climate is a tactic that can be used to improve the day to day experiences of students without necessarily undertaking the broad structural changes required for the transformative restructuring that would create genuine improvement. Because my thesis gathers data at an alternative school, I will continue the literature review with a brief discussion of alternative education, the outcomes and characteristics
of alternative education, and the capabilities of alternative schools to be cultural transmitters as an indicator of a positive school climate.

*Alternative Education*

Efforts to improve the American educational system have been in process since it emerged post-Revolutionary War, and there is a long tradition of working to create changes in the education system that will enable easier and better learning (Iorio & Yeager, 2011). One of these ways to work towards better learning outcomes for children is alternative forms of education. Alternative education captures a nebulous region of educational possibilities. One very basic definition is “Alternative education offers the children and youth who are not functioning well in one type of school, a different option” (Tissington, 2006 p.1). Another definition is “a public elementary/secondary school that addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school or falls outside the categories of regular, special education or vocational education” (Lehr & Lange, 2003, p.1). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, or NCLB, mandated that alternative educational pathways be available to students who are at risk of failure in the public education system. These include “students with disabilities, English language learners, students who identify as an ethnic minority, and students from low socioeconomic status households” (NCLB, 2002, p. 22). Non NCLB mandated schools that fall within the definitional bounds of “alternative” include charter schools, religious schools, schools with a primarily correctional purpose, schools of creative and performing arts, and others.
In an influential 1994 article, Raywid catalogued alternative schools into three categories: progressive innovation, last chance, and remedial intervention. He described how progressive innovation schools work to increase intellectual engagement, last chance schools are mandated programs designed for behavior modification, and remedial intervention schools are focused on either academic, social or emotional rehabilitation (Raywid, 1994).

Characteristics of alternative education vary based on the type of school, but share several common links. First, schools are generally small. This lends itself to smaller class sizes, a higher teacher to student ratio, and a more familial atmosphere (Aron, 2006). Second, alternative schools, by definition, are characterized by methods of learning delivery and school environments that do not resemble traditional public education. Methods that are differentiated from traditional schooling are shown to have the most success at reaching at-risk youth (Van Bockern & Wenger, 2003; Wilson, Stemp & McGinty, 2011). While defining something by the absence of its opposite is not traditionally best practice, shying away from traditional methods of education delivery is a clear commonality between disparate modes of alternative education. Finally, alternative schools are often described as having especially committed and engaged teachers, who use “individual and flexible instructional methods” in order to accommodate the needs of non-typical learners (Aron, 2006; Caroleo, 2014; Lehr & Lange, 2003).

Individual studies have found alternative education to be effective on average, but a gap remains in the outcomes research (Wilkerson et al., 2016). Students who attend
alternative schools have been found to accrue more credits but have worse attendance, to do neither better nor worse on reading or math tests than their traditionally educated peers, but to enjoy school more (Wilkerson et al., 2016, Gleason et al., 2010). I have not come across any studies that measure long-term outcomes of alternative education in terms of college attendance and job attainment.

**Value Transmission**

Another characteristic of alternative education, like education in general, is the presence of an implicit or explicit value system (Bryk, 1988). It is commonly accepted that no such thing as value-free education exists: teachers, administrators, curriculum companies and the state as well as parents to a lesser extent decide what students will learn, how they will be assessed, which answers will be accepted as correct, and whose history will be taught (Campbell, 2003, Narvaez & Lapsley, 2008). The question is not if value transfer is inherent in education because that question has been answered. The question researchers now must address is *how* specifically values are transmitted. Understanding how values are transmitted in the school environment can help us to discover how school climate is created and moved across the school.

Pierre Bourdieu (1974) famously theorized that morals and values move through a process he called cultural transmission. Bourdieu posited that the function of the education system was to maintain structural, class-based inequality through the transmission of various forms of capital, and called this process cultural reproduction.
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(1974). The types of capital, economic, social, and cultural, are developed more in depth in his later work *The Forms of Capital* (1986).

For Bourdieu, cultural reproduction was one of the forces behind inequality and was not something to maintain intentionally. However, more schools are beginning to explicitly create curriculums and implement additional programming to optimize their value transmission processes. According to an article in the *Los Angeles Times*, in 2003 hundreds of schools provided character education and 14 states required that it be provided (Hayasaki, 2003). Hayasaki (2003) pointed to the increase in school shootings and public scandals as the impetus behind the surge in character education programs. These programs spanned a diverse array of methods and included a focus on values in curriculum, prescribed behaviors such as greeting incoming first year students with banners and songs, and field trips to the Hollywood Bowl to practice proper concert etiquette (Hayasaki, 2003). Bourdieu (1984) would have held, however, that the student concert attendees were not learning character, they were gaining class-based cultural capital that would contribute to their potential ability to assimilate to and reproduce the ruling class.

Value transmission occurs in schools, whether intentionally or unintentionally, but how specifically does this happen? The literature points to several ways that children learn what to value as part of their school climate. Narvaez and Lapsley hold that there is a strong component of value transmission from teachers:

Teachers implicitly impart values when they select or exclude topics; when they insist on certain answers as being correct; when they encourage students to seek
the truth of a matter; and when they establish classroom routines, form groups, enforce discipline, and encourage excellence. Teachers mold certain forms of social life within classrooms and influence students’ experiences of community and school membership (2008, p. 157).

Here, the hypothesis is that teachers shape school climate because they are the ones hierarchically in charge of the students. This is a very top down approach to understanding how a positive school climate occurs, and I was interested to examine the roles of other community members in this process.

All of these articles define what a school climate consists of, but there is very little research on how schools create them. One article pointed to teachers as the active creators of school climate, and another to a special peace education program that described how to generate and maintain a healthy school climate (Dana, 1993; Jeffries & Harris, 1996). However, none of these worked to examine the school as a comprehensive whole.

Taken altogether, the research on the importance of school climate paired with the definitional traits of alternative education, such as curricular and instructional flexibility, and small class sizes with more teacher/student interaction lend themselves easily to value transmission processes addressed in the literature reviewed above. This fact, along with Raywid’s seminal definition of the three types of alternative education as designed to better the student, school, or education system, shows that, like public schools, alternative education creates and transmits specific values and culture, either intentionally or unintentionally. However, I argue that alternative schools are able to be more
thoughtful and intentional about their school climate, and thus, effective in their cultural transmission processes. This thesis works to answer the question of how school climate is created and maintained by the students, teachers, and administrators by using the case study of Leaves of Learning, an alternative school in Cincinnati, OH.

Methods

Data Collection Method

In order to study this subject, I undertook a qualitative research study of Leaves of Learning, an alternative school with a fascinating school climate located in Cincinnati, Ohio. I chose Leaves of Learning for several reasons. As a former student, I had intimate access to it, it was a small school and thus easier to study, and because I find the school climate of Leaves incredibly interesting as both a former student and current sociology of education student. I obtained approval from the Ohio University Internal Review Board and permission and support from the director of Leaves of Learning. Data were collected during December of 2016 from students, teachers, and administrators of Leaves of Learning. Respondents were primarily residents of Cincinnati, Ohio, as this was a very localized study. I conducted semistructured interviews with 15 students, eight teachers, and five administrators for a total sample size of 28 (n=28). Of the 15 students, seven were male and eight were female, and of those, seven were new and eight were long time students. Of the eight teachers, five were female and three were male. Three of the teachers were new to Leaves and five were veteran Leaves of Learning teachers. The five administrators were all female and longterm members of the Leaves of Learning
community. This was not a purposive sample, all the administrators except for a few members of the Board are women. I sampled for being a Leaves of Learning student, teacher or administrator, and I attempted to balance the number of new students and teachers with old students and teachers. I also attempted to balance gender representation, even though it is not balanced in the greater population of Leaves.

I collected my own data by first contacting my siblings who attend Leaves of Learning and then through snowball sampling. I did not interview my siblings, but they recommended many of the interview subjects because they knew whether someone was a new or old student, teacher, or administrator. I contacted participants, whether students, teachers, or administrators in person at school over the one week data collection period, and asked them if they were comfortable being interviewed. If they agreed, I asked them, and if they were a minor, their parent, to sign a release form. Once I received the completed consent form from both student and parent, if applicable, I interviewed the participants in empty classrooms or lunchrooms to protect subject privacy. I asked new students eight questions and old students seven, (see Appendix A). General topics included questions about what fellow students were like, how they interacted with the teachers, and if they thought the school had changed over time. Student interviews lasted on average 8-15 minutes. I asked teachers and administrators seven questions (see Appendix A), and the average interview time for them was 25 minutes. General topics included what they thought of their students, if they tried to transmit any culture to the students, how they thought the culture was moved and shaped and what their job was in
the school, beyond purely academic work. Administrators were asked very similar questions as the teachers, and their interviews lasted between 10 and 30 minutes.

I sought out these specific groups of people because I believed that they could provide the most in-depth information about these questions of school climate and culture. New students I anticipated would be able to see the differences between Leaves and their previous schools more clearly, and describe the culture in a different way than veteran students. I chose to interview long-term students because they would have different insights about what the culture and climate were like here, if they had changed, and how they had changed. The teachers I sought out because much of the literature referenced them as major cultural transmitters, and the administrators because their job is to actively design and shape the climate.

I also did fieldwork observations of material culture at the school, examining the interiors of classrooms, lunchrooms, and hallways. I examined only empty classrooms, hallways and lunchrooms, and I did not collect data while those spaces were being used to protect the privacy of students who did not sign consent forms. With the material cultural exploration, I hoped to examine how the physical space shapes the culture. Leaves has a very distinctive interior, and I hypothesized that the physical environment that students are in helps to create and shape the culture. I wanted to look at the decorations to see how they reflect the culture including posters, artwork, photos, student contributions, signs for upcoming events, etc. I also wanted to look at the typical classroom setup as the setting that learning occurs plays a major role on how said learning is delivered and received. I also examined the physical building to see how being
housed in a traditional school building, as Leaves of Learning currently is, could be perceived as changing the school climate of an educational community that was previously housed in a barn.

**Data Analysis Method**

I transcribed all the interviews using a transcription program on my laptop. I memoed consistently while transcribing, and noted when common themes arose. Then, I printed the 22 pages of memos, cut them up, and sorted them into thematic piles. These piles became the dominant codes. They included: descriptors of culture, student taxonomy, physical environment, student/teacher relationship, academic rigor, and self-conceptions of Leaves of Learning. Of these, I subsumed student/teacher relationship into the category of staff labor to include the data on administrative workings, and decided not to include the category of academic rigor, as it had little to no bearing on my thesis questions. I color-coded the data into those themes and then sorted them into separate documents by their assigned code and color. Once in these code-specific documents, I read over the entire code and sorted it into subthemes that emerged. Those subthemes became the outlines for each section.

**Setting and Demographics**

**Students**

After obtaining parental consent, I interviewed students above the age of 13 and at or below the age of 18. Because class year is not a defining factor at Leaves of Learning
and many people do not know what grade they are, I did not inquire about it. Nobody identified themselves as being a member of the LGBT+ community. There is moderate class homogeneity, most of the students are middle to upper class. This is shown by the fact that they have enough privilege and resources to attend a moderately expensive school that does not offer many scholarships like Leaves of Learning. Leaves of Learning costs between $8.75- $11.62 an instructional hour, depending on how many instructional hours the student takes with more hours taken equating to less charged per hour. There is also a cost for class materials, and families are required to perform a family job around the school or pay a fee that will enable Leaves of Learning to hire a replacement for the job. A few students had learning challenges or mental illness that they shared with me. I was told in interviews that families, teachers and administrators at Leaves of Learning have similar liberal politics. Race was only notable through its homogeneity in this environment, I interviewed only one person of color in the entire sample. Overall, the Leaves of Learning population is overwhelmingly “white middle class liberals,” as one student acerbically put it.

Teachers and administrators followed the same pattern: white liberal people who did not self identify as any marginalized gender identity or sexual orientation. All teachers and administrators seemed to be between the ages of 30 and 60.

Setting

Leaves of Learning walks a narrow line between falling into several categories. It serves as a primary schooling option, where students take all of their academic classes. It also functions as a supplementary education program, where students can take only a few
classes if they are having trouble with a subject. Students are also able to take only electives. Leaves of Learning offers classes such as fencing, performance Shakespeare, set design, storytelling, advanced Legos, and cooking, as well as the typical course offerings such as French, geometry, English and history.

Leaves of Learning is a completely self-selected population. In order to attend, you must know about it, predominantly through word of mouth, be able to pay the school fees, and be able to provide transportation to and from school every day. There are scholarships available, but because Leaves does not receive any funding besides the tuition money it collects from students and its own fundraising efforts, these are few and far between.

The exceedingly small size of Leaves of Learning, which consists of approximately 250 students ranging in age from preschool to high school, gathers together these demographically similar students into a small communal setting, and provides conditions for solidarity among students. According to interviews, the main areas of diversity at Leaves of Learning are not race or class, they are gender identity, and physical and mental ability status. These will be explored in more detail later in this thesis.

Given all this information about the setting, we turn now to my research question: how do members of the Leaves of Learning community create and transmit their school climate? Understanding the students backgrounds and reasons for attending Leaves of Learning is important in studying school climate because through a student taxonomy, we
learn how their backgrounds impact the school climate, how they understand the culture, and how they maintain and transmit what it means to be a “Leaves kid.”

**Findings**

Leaves of Learning Student Taxonomy

I found that teachers, students, and administrators, with a few exceptions, consciously classify their students into two main groups. They identify these groups as long term homeschoolers and students who are refugees from public school for a variety of reasons. One teacher elaborates when asked about what kind of students Leaves attracts: “So there are two different types, kids who have been homeschooled and haven’t been around that are already much more open and willing to try new things and talk to people. Kids who have been through a bullying situation or a bad situation at school, it takes them a good six months to acclimate.” She delineates a common understanding of the student population as either a “typical” homeschooler or a public school outcast. Many other teachers also described two main groups of students as long-term homeschoolers and refugees from other educational environments. Examining how community members, such as other students, teachers, and administrators, perceive the student body can help us to understand how they treat them, leading to learning how the community behaves.

I argue that there is more nuance to be found in examining the motivations for attendance at Leaves of Learning than the binary described above. I found that students describe each other and are described by teachers and administrators in eight main ways.
There are students who attend Leaves for positive reasons: to be challenged academically, because their hobby or main activity takes up too much of their time for traditional education, or because they require supplemental classes to their homeschooling. There are also students who go to Leaves for negative reasons: because they have been bullied, with a small subset of the population being bullied specifically for being trans or gender non-conforming, because of mental health issues or learning disabilities, because they have been expelled or asked not to return from their previous school, or because they think they can get away with doing less work at Leaves. It is very important to note that these categories can and do mostly co-exist. For example, a student may be from public school who was bullied for being trans and lives with mental illness, or a champion figure skater with learning disabilities. It is essential that we understand these categories as intersecting and non-exclusive in order to gain a realistic view of who these students are. By examining the various backgrounds and perspectives of the students, we can begin to understand the components of this school’s climate.

Positive reasons

I. Longtime homeschoolers

Originally, Leaves of Learning was founded by and for long time homeschoolers. I have included long term Leaves of Learning attendees, even if they may have attended public school previously, in this category. When asked why they began attending Leaves of Learning, these students offered explanations such as “So, my family had been homeschooling since I was in first grade and then my mom ended up wanting to go back
to school and get a job so she could do that, and dad already had a job, so we decided to go here.” Often, information about Leaves of Learning was transmitted by word of mouth, or pure coincidence. Several students cited friends currently attending Leaves, friends of their parents knowing about the school, and in one instance, touring the school next door and stumbling across the small learning community, which at that point in the school’s evolution was housed in a barn:

“I was at a public school and they weren’t going to offer special education, like enrichment education after third grade so my parents were looking for somewhere else that I could go, and their friends went to the really preppy private school that was right next to the barn, and they were like huh, there’s kids playing over at that barn, I wonder what that is? And they found out it was Leaves of Learning! My parents heard about that and were like, that sounds way cooler than that preppy private school, and so I went to the barn for a day and was like this is the most amazing thing ever. The next year it wasn’t the barn anymore but I went to Leaves and I was like, this is awesome.”

This family found out about Leaves through pure coincidence, and one of the parents is now a beloved and influential teacher. Longtime Leaves attendees also fit in this category if the students have attended Leaves for five or more years, even if they came from public school originally. I included them in this category because it seems that after five years, the students are very similar to those who have never attended public school. This phenomena is one of my areas of interest in this project.
II. Academic seekers

Other students attend Leaves of Learning because they are not being challenged in traditional education. It is worth noting that no students self-reported that they attend Leaves for an increase in intellectual challenge, but three teachers said that their students did. One long time teacher said:

I think some kids are here because they are pretty self-motivated learners and they actually feel somewhat slowed down by the pace of a normal school so they actually enjoy the fact that they can come here and have more individualized attention and they can ask questions more easily of people and they can more individualize what they do, so I think the people here are here because they have a certain academic agenda that they’re really excited about and this place lets them do that.

I have included this type of student in the taxonomy because I believe that it is an underlying category for other transplants. It is also worth noting that the perception of students as academic seekers seems to be a very healthy one to school climate. If teachers and students understand the students to be there because they are intellectually motivated, it seems that they will treat them as such. The students will be credited for their academic interests and respected for their academic seeking, while teachers will potentially gain greater satisfaction from teaching.
III. Prodigies

Other student populations in the “positive” reasons for attendance taxonomy according to this data are the “prodigies.” These students are the ones who are homeschooled because they focus primarily on a talent that makes participating in a typical educational environment difficult. Leaves of Learning, with its flexible class schedules and understanding educational professionals, is often the answer. A relatively new teacher marveled:

“I have one little girl in [class] who’s a deeply devoted and serious ballerina, I mean she had six roles in the Nutcracker, she had six roles. And she’s only ten, but she’s apparently amazing and is going to make a career in ballet. So her parents sent her here once a week for one class only, because there are so many French words in ballet. All the rest of the time, you know, so she’s a special case, she’s not a typical kid, nothing wrong with her, quite the contrary. And I had an Olympic ice skater come through here, same thing. She didn’t have time to go to public school so she’s here for supplementary learning. And those kids are in a different space intellectually than your normal bunch of kids.

Even if the students are not actually Olympic ice skaters, they still have outside interests that consume a great deal of time, making use of the flexible class schedules of Leaves. Another new teacher commented that “I've never taught students who for example, perform at a circus. Or have actually filmed a movie with other students in my class. The things I learn about them on an equally daily, monthly, weekly basis. I'll find out that a student I've taught in five classes I didn't know was actually secretly a judo master in real
life too, or was a professional wrestler, or things of that nature.” The sense of pride the teachers feel from having accomplished students seems to help contribute to a positive school climate.

Negative Reasons

The other main population Leaves serves, according to teachers, students, and administrators, is what has been called the “refugees” from public school. One teacher does an excellent job of breaking down the groups included in this population:

One category are kids who, either for social issues or whatever, they felt very alienated by the standard school system, which, at its worst can be a bit predatory to certain types of people. So you know, in the past that has been more, because you were on the Asperger spectrum or if you were from some sort of racial or religious minority or whatever. I think we’re seeing an uptick of transgender kids, for example, but I think it’s the same reason that all those kids are there, whoever feels that they are having a rough time in the school system, so those are kind of our refugee population I guess.

The teacher breaks down the reasons for student attendance into whether they had been bullied, specifically for ability status, religious affiliation, or gender identity. Discussion of the particular categories of victimization will follow, but I will start with a general overview.
I. Bullied

Students who did not specify a reason that they were bullied I placed into the umbrella category of “bullied.” One student explained his previous situation:

Well, I used to go to Loveland schools, the Loveland school district for second grade till sixth grade, but from third grade to sixth grade it didn’t really go so well. Almost every day I got bullied. And I’d just come home and I always had a bad day. Like the only times I had a good day is when they were sick and not there. Or when I’d sit by my friends at lunch, and I only had three friends there. They contrast being bullied at other schools with being welcomed at Leaves: “At my old school I got bullied a lot, and I felt like, there were so many kids in a classroom, I think it was thirty two, and the teacher couldn’t really handle it and teach, and it was all common core so it wasn’t really suited for everyone. Here, it’s kind of formed around the students, and they teach what you need to learn.” Students who were bullied at other schools describe feeling safe and at home at Leaves, and are welcomed by the other students.

II. Trans/gender non-conforming

Another category under the refugee umbrella is students who are transgender or gender non-conforming. Although I was not able to obtain exact numbers of transgender students compared to cisgender students, there is general consensus that there are more trans and gender nonconforming students than ever before in the history of the school. One teacher marveled: “...In just the past two weeks I’ve met four kids who are trans who
are new this year.” The influx of these students is a recent development at Leaves, and seems to be a site of minor apprehension. One teacher describes the reaction of others:

So issues of what do we do with trans kids in our community and how do we respond? It’s new to a lot of teachers. trying to understand, because we’re dealing with people wanting to be called different names and that sometimes flips from week to week and some parents know and some parents don’t, so there’s just this conversation. So learning to, we had a discussion about this with the board although I wasn’t there for that one but I talked with the head of the board about it.

Not only has the Leaves of Learning board of trustees met to discuss this newly growing population, but so have the teachers. “And we did have a meeting this week for the staff to discuss it because there are a lot of trans kids this year, we just want to… that’s a community we need to be aware of and need to be mindful of.” The necessity of having special board meetings and teacher meetings to discuss proper respectful procedures speaks to the desire to be inclusive coupled with the fear of messing up. The integration process of trans and gender nonconforming students would be an interesting site of future study.

III. “Sad kids” and “a whole different brain”

Many students come to Leaves because their mental health challenges or learning disabilities are not able to be accommodated at a public school. One student astutely noted that
A lot of other people are here because they have or at one time had some kind of educational special needs, so there’s a lot more ADHD, depression, what have you, than I think you’d find at a public school. And I think that sort of honestly makes us more, it adds to the intimacy of the place.

The self identification of both the mental health problems and educational special needs as a common factor and a creator of “intimacy” shows an underlying assumption of the students at Leaves is that they’re all not “normal.” When this student casually self-identified in solidarity with the students with mental health challenges and learning disabilities, it showed the acceptance and ease with which these areas of diversity are treated.

Several teachers describe their classes as mixed in terms of ability status; one English teacher explained: “I have classrooms with a kid who could be super sharp, super assertive, high on the progress ladder or whatever, and I’ll also have a kid in class who has a speech impediment. And I’ve never encountered personally anybody taunting anybody or making fun of anybody, so that’s pretty cool.” Leaves is consistently described as a haven for students with physical, mental or learning challenges, and many students cite their struggles with health as a motivator in attending Leaves. One student described his journey to Leaves:

I had a lot of sensory integration issues, you know, like, I was definitely what you would call like special needs, I mean, not in the sense of like being disabled as far as learning things went, but as far as sensory processing issues and stuff, I was
stressed out, I was kind of a wreck, and couldn’t decide, public school wouldn’t work.

Another student lived with anxiety and came to Leaves through public and private education not working for her and her health:

So last year at the beginning of last year I ended up at Ursuline Academy, if you know, and I was there for exactly one week. It was at the beginning of the year, one week. And I freaked out, I had consistent panic attacks, they had to give me a special note, they had to make one so I could go to the counselor at all hours of the day, it was bad. It was bad.

Leaves of Learning, with its smaller class sizes and attentive teachers is often more equipped to handle students with learning disabilities and mental health challenges, and by virtue of serving many students with these needs, is able to serve more.

One teacher described relating to one of her student who had a Individualized Education Program (IEP) in place and being able to bond with him:

I have this student because, I laugh because he’s an IEP student so he came in with some particularly lacking social skills. And I am not the most tactful person in the world, and some of the teachers who have been here for a while know that. And I was talking to them and I was like, I’m teaching him tact! And they just looked at me -laughter-. But you see, I’m the only person who can teach him tact, because I’m the only person who’s close enough to where he is to not just go oh my god, I can’t believe you just said that.
Because the teacher could relate to this student, she was able to bond with him and teach him in a way that many other teachers and educational approaches could not have done.

One student described students at Leaves as having “a whole different brain.” It appears that being “sad kids” and sharing struggles with learning and mental health helps to bond students together, normalizing these challenges and creating communal understanding and support for the students with mental health challenges.

Reactions of current students

The reactions of current students to the new refugee students are generally very positive, they identify with them and value them and what they can bring to the student body. When I asked about what the students were like, one newer student gushed: “They’re just so amazing and they’re all unique and they’re like the kids that at public school get pushed away into the background but once you actually meet them they’re the most awesome people in the world you know?” This identification of Leaves students with the marginalized public school students while placing a high value on their personalities and presence shows the general attitude towards the refugee students. One student summed it up well when he said: “The best ones are the ones who have been in that environment on the outside, because they come to Leaves and they’re immediately welcomed in here, and they have all these negative experiences with cliques and they help to break down the clique cycle at Leaves.” This shows that the new refugee students and the current Leaves students have the same priorities when it comes to the school climate and socializing. Refugee students have a vested interest in making sure the culture of Leaves remains inclusive, and when properly empowered, can help the current
students to maintain a clique-free zone. Leaves students help the refugee students in return, helping them to “open up,” or overcome hangups about social interaction and trauma from previous negative experiences. This is incredibly important to the formation and maintenance of the school climate at Leaves of Learning. One longtime student explained it well. “I think new kids tend to be really scared because a lot of them come out of bad situations, a lot of them have been bullied, physical or mental health problems, a lot of times there’s something that drives them here. So they tend to start out scared, and it’s fun to watch them open up. Sometimes it’s soon, sometimes it takes a while, but I can’t think of anybody who has come in new and become more closed off since they got here.” This mutual and reciprocal process helps the old students to maintain the culture of Leaves and the new students to blossom and find a home that treats them well. In this way, the climate of the school is cyclically and carefully maintained.

However, there are some notes of discord when discussing new students. Leaves of Learning students seem to mostly be respectful of the gender identities of their fellow students but one student did speak with scorn about the “tumblr generation,” referring to tumblr, a popular social media platform that is often on the vanguard of social justice issues:

Now a lot more people of the tumblr generation are here, and all the different gendered people. Again, not saying that’s a bad thing, it’s just new. The tumblr generation is now coming, and some people don’t take jokes very well, because… I probably shouldn’t name names. Somebody was making a joke about, because there’s so many different genders that I can see the joke in that, because there are
so many different ones, well, I'm not saying anything more about that. But making a joke like, oh, I'm hyper-gender, because I'm all the different genders at once and someone was like, I'm triggered. Like, really? I've never heard that at Leaves before, okay. And more people are going to start coming like that. The tumblr generation is now growing. Not sure whether that's a good or bad thing.

Besides a discomfort with change and the critique of the “tumblr generation,” students are generally welcoming and enthusiastic about the new students. When students are inclusive, positive and welcoming to the refugee students, it shows a school climate where all are welcome and a firm stance is taken against bullying and cliques. The school climate works actively to be inclusive to these students, but not necessarily all student behaviors.

“A Wake of Destruction”

I. Slackers

It seems that the only types of students who are not necessarily welcomed with open arms are the last two in the taxonomy: students who are slackers and students who are “jaded.” Because of the welcoming and understanding environment, some students occasionally try to get away with not doing their work. Teachers often report problems with students who do not do their homework, but interestingly, this problem is not only identified by teachers. Some students complain about the students who do less work too. According to one student, it is not a reflection of the school, but of the student: “there were one or two [students] who didn’t want to be in school, it didn’t matter what the school was, they
didn’t… They weren’t using the resources they had.” One teacher described having a particularly effective slacker in his class as leaving “a wake of destruction.” Because this situation was not addressed effectively when the student was in school, the teacher went on to say that they were leaving a bad model and for a couple years after there were a few other kids who were trying to get away with doing very very little and so they were challenging the remnants of how little they could do to get through the system because they had seen in it in this one kid who got away with it for several years. So I felt like it took us several years to sort through that, and I honestly feel bad for the kids who got caught up in that wake, because the kid who was not learning a whole lot, I feel like they have their reward which is you know, they didn’t learn anything, and I think their whole life is going to be more challenging because of that.

He saw the student who was slacking off as modeling negative behavior for the rest of the students, negatively affecting the culture and the institutionally encouraged cultural love of learning. After this student graduated, he said that the teachers and administrators cracked down more and were “a lot more blunt about, if you don’t actually want to put some effort in then you’re not doing yourself any favors for what happens.” In this teacher’s view, the punishment that the student who tampered with the culture received, not learning anything, was sufficient. Another teacher described her efforts to counteract the effect of the slackers as gently reasoning with the whole class at the beginning of the year when completing their yearly teacher/student contract.
I’ll say, what do you guys think about if only one person is completing their homework and nobody else is doing assignments at home, how are you going to feel about that, what does that do to the class? And they’ll talk about that and say that it’s not fair to the person who is completing it, it brings the whole class to a halt.

This teacher works to counteract the effect of slackers on her class and the culture by anticipating it and working to grow the empathy and thoughtfulness of students by putting them in the shoes of the students who were faithfully completing work. This is an intentional way to affect the school climate and make sure that emphasis is placed on doing homework not only because it is good for the student doing it but also because it is good for the community at large.

II. Jaded kids

The last population of students Leaves has is the students who come from public school because they might have been expelled or asked not to return. Sometimes these students are disruptive, have drug habits, and perform behaviors that are incompatible with the climate of Leaves of Learning, like rudeness, creating drama, and as one student put it, “cussing and inappropriate clothes.” One teacher describes this population as:

we’re getting a lot of getting a lot of kids from school situations where it wasn’t working. And so we’re trying to... shifting the dynamic sometimes with these jaded kids, sometimes you bring these jaded kids in, and I’m not trying to say that all public school kids are jaded, but there’s definitely a high percentage of more jaded kids in public school.
While expressing wariness about getting students who “we have no idea what their backstory is which can be scary,” this teacher modeled compassion. She explained that the students were jaded “just because you're trying to protect yourself the whole time while you're trying to navigate the educational system. So we're getting a lot more kids coming in that sometimes bring a little bit of that chip on their shoulder, and it takes a little bit of time to wear it down. And hopefully they make enough friends.” She described them as working to protect themselves in the hostile environment of their previous educational experience, and developing a hard shell of behaviors and attitudes. Unfortunately, these coping mechanisms are essentially incompatible with the culture at Leaves of Learning and the teacher described them as something that needs “wearing down.” A student explained more clearly what these students represent to the Leaves community:

When I first went here, I felt like nothing was going to, nothing could happen. No drama or anything. But the next two years I guess that kind of changed. There’s drama, and just not, it’s starting to feel like public school, kind of like Loveland, but not like…. Mainly because of the newer students. I think the newer students from their schools, from their past schools, I think they bring some of that public school with them, and bring it to Leaves, kind of. Like cussing, kind of inappropriate clothes, drama, and just bringing public school.

These students are seen to change the school climate of Leaves by bringing behaviors, habits and norms that are not viewed favorably by Leaves students. I discuss the divide between Leaves of Learning and the rest of the world in more depth in a later chapter, but
to introduce the topic now, I found a combined fear and distrust of the outside world in terms of educational facilities that I would hold stems at least partially from the high population of refugee students. A very common fear expressed by students, teachers, and administrators, is losing the unique Leaves of Learning culture, and most of the information garnered about the “jaded kids” related to that in some way. From one student:

it seems very much like this school has, I would almost say normalized, which is a weird way to put it, but we’ve gotten so many more people. It started out when I got here that most people were homeschooled, and at this point there are a lot more people who have come from other schools, and that’s great, it’s changed the dynamic somewhat, and it feels a little more like a normal school.

While he doesn’t resent the presence of the public school students, he is concerned about the “dynamic” of Leaves, how it’s becoming “normalized,” and essentially how it could lose the current positive school climate.

These typologies and how they interact within and between students are very important to the school climate of Leaves of Learning. They describe how students come to this school, how they interact with the school, and what their typical values and behaviors are upon arrival. I argue that new students need to be socialized into the school climate in order to become “Leaves kids,” as part of an intentional and conscious process of climate management.
Leaves Kids

Clearly, members of the Leaves community notice and worry about the difference between public school students, or “schoolies,” and community students, or “Leaves kids.” We have already covered reasons why students attend Leaves, but now we turn our attention to a deeper question: what does it mean to be a Leaves kid? What does the type of student the school creates, and their values, behaviors and preferences say about school climate? Attendance at Leaves is clearly not sufficient to render a student a Leaves kid. Instead, this is a clearly delineated concept and group to the people I interviewed. One student gave a fairly concise summary: “A typical Leaves kid is pretty funny, very relaxed, kind of mostly worry-free. Very funny, very comfortable, they love Leaves and the essence that is Leaves, they just love it so much. They get along great with the teachers, and that, you have this teacher, student compatibility here that’s just awesome. And that’s one of the things that I love about this school.” A teacher gave a more eloquent answer to the question of what a Leaves kid is:

In my experience, a Leaves kid is one who is happy. And I mean that in an intrinsic, and they're a little weird, but in the best, most amazing way. They're the kind of person that everybody likes, because they make people, they're just who they are. And I especially am thinking about the kids who have really grown up at Leaves and are so used to this culture. And they're just who they are and some kids think they're weirdos and some kids are just like massively influenced by this person who's just compassionately marching to their own beat, because that's the
thing about them, I think true blue Leaves kids are really kind, and have a little edge to them but are really kind kids who are very non judgemental and are very accepting of others. And I think that's one of the coolest things about what a Leaves kids looks like.

These specific descriptions of the characterization of a Leaves kid as happy, confident and kind stand in tension with the comments of another teacher who described being a Leaves kid as a more abstract construct:

Rather than being more, this is what a Leaves type person looks like, this is how we’re going to inculturate you, I think it’s more, we’re trying to acculturate you to be able to fit in anywhere, because you’re capable of listening to people and seeing what’s going on with them and figure out how that works.

This focus on Leaves kids as definitionally capable of inclusivity in any situation highlights the importance of inclusivity in the school climate. Two main themes emerged while coding this chapter on Leaves kids. They are sustained and deep inclusivity and joy in both learning and being. Also included in this section is a chapter on drama in the Leaves of Learning environment, because no high school is without it, no matter how positive the school climate.

I. Inclusivity

I attended Leaves of Learning, but had not returned in a while when I started my research. I was sitting on the couch in the teen lunchroom between interviews and two students who I had never met before came up to me and, under the assumption that I was a new student, welcomed me and made conversation for the rest of the lunch period so
that I felt included in the space. I explained that I was not a student, and was in fact conducting research, and they offered to help. Unfortunately, they were twelve and below the age range of my study, but they did comment that they themselves had only been there for two and three years respectively. I would hold that these students were prime examples of Leaves kids. When asked how new students are treated at Leaves of Learning, one longtime student shared an anecdote:

Student: Okay. I’d like to tell a story. There was this one girl who came to Leaves… I love this story. I don’t remember her name, it was a few years ago. Diana came walking in and we were all sitting in a circle talking about something, and Diana was like, hey, there’s this new girl, she seems really shy, and she was just like, help her around the school and stuff and we were like sure, and immediately this giant group of people surrounds this girl and starts asking her all these questions, trying to get her to join in to what we were doing and stuff, and we never saw her again. -laughter-

Interviewer: You never saw her again?

Student: I think we scared her with how inclusive we are. So I would say that’s a problem, but it’s just… Leaves kids are very inclusive and I mean that, we are VERY inclusive, so… Leaves kids, I personally always try to do my best to help new kids around and there are plenty of Leaves kids that do the same thing, try to help people around, so if you’re very open minded and you’re in this environment, it’ll be great.
This story illustrates Leaves of Learning inclusivity, albeit with a more extreme twist than usual. A group of students was asked by an administrator to make a new student feel welcome, and they jumped to it with joy and alacrity. Unfortunately, she was introverted and this had the exact opposite effect, but the effort was made. The persistent usage of the phrase “Leaves kid” in the final paragraph clearly illustrates the centrality of the theme of inclusivity because the question had nothing to do with being a Leaves kid. Instead, I asked the student about how new students are treated, and got essentially what appeared to be the job description of a Leaves kid in return. When I asked about what students were like at Leaves, I got essentially the same answer. The words “welcoming,” “inclusive,” and “kind” were used by almost everybody who answered this question. A teacher explicitly said that

I think some of the key marks of Leaves are inclusivity, and I think people are really tolerant of one another...And I think that’s one of the biggest benefits, or the biggest, one of the most beautiful things about Leaves is that tolerance that kids seem to have for one another. And also an ignorance of things like age, things like, most kids don’t even know what grade they’re in. They’re just here and they’re just learning, they’re focusing on their friends who they’re friends with, and sometimes the kids are three years younger than them or three years older than them.

This shows me that an essential component of what people understand to be a Leaves kid, as well as an essential component of Leaves of Learning itself is inclusivity. I will discuss
inclusivity more in a later chapter, including ways that teachers and administrators handle inclusivity but this is a brief introduction to the subject.

**Climate-policing**

This school climate of inclusivity has an interesting reverse. When students are confronted with behavior that is in opposition to or dangerous to the established culture at Leaves of Learning, they make it clear that the behavior meets with disapproval. One teacher describes this self-policing phenomenon that occurs “once kids are here for just a little bit,” or once they’ve become Leaves kids:

Once kids are here for just a little bit, they don’t put up with stuff. They don’t put up with people being mean to other students, or anything like that. They don’t put up with it either. So where there are definitely times where she [the director] has to step in, or a teacher has to step in and say no, this isn’t cool, the kids do it before we do it. So I think that they’re as protective of their peaceful place as we are. So I think everyone contributes to it.

The explanation of the students as “not putting up with” bullying behavior connects back to my point about how certain types of students are not quite as welcome as others. The behaviors of students who affect the culture in negative ways, the “slackers” and the “jaded kids,” are negatively received by current students, which sends the message to them that they have to change their ways of interacting with school members in order to fit in. Another description of the self-policing process was provided by a longtime student.
Student: A great thing about Leaves is that the culture here, it’s so good that you’re able to do, there are many problems that you face that you don’t even have to go to the administration about because the student body is able to solve the problems before the administration even needs to get involved. And that just makes everything better, because being told off by another student is going to make you stop doing something more than being told off by a teacher who you see as a far away, evil, tyrannical person who wants to put their rules on you and you can’t tell me what to do, but when your peers are actually coming to you and saying “hey, knock that off” you’re a lot more likely to actually knock them off.

Interviewer: What are some behaviors that people are like “stop that, knock it off?”

Student: Any form of bullying or any form of getting people to like… Trying to create groups or create cliques or stuff like that. It’s really hard to openly try to be like “this is my group, don’t join my group” because people will quickly put a stop to that. Overall negative or bad behaviors or things like that, ways that people try to put down others or be a jerk are quickly dealt with pretty quickly.

This student identified the effectiveness of student feedback as opposed to teacher feedback in identifying negative behaviors and ending them. Specifically, he described bullying and cliquishness as behaviors that Leaves students will not tolerate within the school climate. I argue that Leaves of Learning students play a role as arbiters of social inclusion, deciding which behaviors are acceptable in their culture and which are not. This self-policing shows a school climate of student investment in the Leaves of Learning
culture as well as the empowerment and ownership of the students over their space. Although Leaves of Learning welcomes all students, they prefer and encourage the ones that will contribute to their school climate.

II. Joy

The last thing that characterizes a Leaves kid is a difficult to quantify joy. Leaves kids are unafraid to be loud and excited and sing and dance in the halls. One teacher described what was unique about Leaves with “You see expressions of joy all the time, you have music playing, kids can get on and start playing the piano, you can act things out, you can duct tape the teachers to the wall. Things that bring joy to young and old.” Leaves of Learning students also enjoy “shenanigans,” goofy pranks or activities. For example, one relatively new student told me about how she and her boyfriend went around the school asking people if they could brush their teeth. When I asked if people let them do this, she seemed surprised and said yes, listing a set of people including teachers who allowed her to brush their teeth. The fact that students and teachers were not only tolerant but encouraging of this out of the ordinary pastime points to a school climate that values the cultivation of joy and silliness. Leaves kids often involve teachers and administrators in their inside jokes and madcap adventures. For example, one new teacher explained the antics in her classroom:

I am not afraid to let myself and my interests shine, and I tend to be an enthusiastic person so to show that energy, I'm not afraid to do that. And I feel like that is something that helps, the Star Wars stuff, all my films things, all the Mother Russia things which would take me awhile to explain, and we're doing
1984 so that's why all the Communist stuff. and then Shaft, that's been a phenomenon stemming from my film class who's studying blaxploitation films, and it's permeated all the way through my English classes where it’s all of a sudden in their workshops, and we have a teen dance where I guarantee there will be a lot of people representing Shaft, myself included...They bring all this joy and goodness out of me, I'm going to put that right back on them. They're the ones that make me feel this way, they're the ones who make me express joy and happiness and jump up and down and duct tape myself to walls for fundraisers, they're the ones who do this, so all of that is for them.

The things she listed as joyous and humorous permeate the entire community, from the classroom, where the inside joke about the movie Shaft started, to administrative efforts such as the ‘duct taping a teacher to the wall for a fundraiser, and to the teen spaces like the dance and hallways. The particular whimsicality of Leaves was detailed again by a new student when I asked her what was different about Leaves compared to her old school. She replied

Um, people walk around in onesies? It's much more free and open. Everyone seems to be like doing their own thing but everyone seems to be really open about their own thing and they don’t seems scared about it. There's people who walk around with their favorite stuffed animal and no one shames them for it. I wore pajamas to school once and nobody even questioned it. I have duct tape on my shoe with a Jolly Rancher [candy] attached to it and no one’s questioning it!
The point this student made about fellow students not being “scared” or “shamed” for being goofy shows a school climate that feels safe enough to express silliness. Open presentation, lack of dress code, and normalizing of individuality and silliness contribute to the culture of goofiness and whimsicality of Leaves kids. Leaves kids are not afraid of the arts, they make music and perform short plays and do art seemingly without worrying about what others make of their expression. One longtime student listed his crowning achievement as a rap battle against another longtime student that forty students gathered around to hear. When I asked who won, he explained that another student had jumped in at the end and “kicked both our asses,” without rancor or concern. A teacher described some shenanigans that were witnessed by a younger student:

Yesterday after school I had a new student, a little tiny fourth grader, and he walked out and [a student] was in a mermaid costume walking out, and the little guy was like “what’s that?” and [the student] was like “I’m a mermaid, little dude!” So those are my favorite things too, the things you overhear in the halls.

It seems that everyone in the community appreciates the joy and whimsicality displayed by the Leaves students.

*Self-determination*

To me, this shows that Leaves kids have and take full advantage of the right to self-determination. Without the dress code, limits set on the pianos lining the hallways, or anyone to call them weird, Leaves students are able to be and do what they want, as long as they are not hurting others. One new student explained what she found strange and new about Leaves was her right to bodily self determination: “And that’s another thing,
you can wear what you want, dye your hair how you want, piercings, all that, you can be yourself.” The ability to express themselves with their physical appearance as well as their antics is cherished by the students. From an administrative standpoint, student antics seem to be not only tolerated but encouraged. A very illustrative example is from a newer student who explained the reaction from the director and co-director to a student’s desire to duct tape himself to a wall:

Because [the directors], when kids are like, [a student] got duct taped to the wall last year, he’s just expressing himself, he wants to be happy, he’s not doing anything wrong, so they allowed it. [The director] was like, you can use the wall in my office if you want, that would be perfect for you to be duct taped to the wall because that’s what you want to do, but it’s not harming other people.

The focus of the administrators on helping students to express themselves and to be goofy while being safe and not hurting other students is a fine line to walk. Occasionally students view the administrators as overstepping their role. More about the relationship between students and administrators will follow but a brief but edifying example is the cessation of the Nerf Wars. For readers without younger siblings or children, Nerf guns fire foam darts and come in many different models and colors. One longtime student explained:

So because since last year we decided to start this ongoing Nerf war at Leaves, and apparently some teacher complained about it having the Nerf guns out in classrooms. So what did [the director] do? Not punish the individuals offenders or make any special rules, no no no, she just bans the fucking Nerf war. It’s like I
feel like [the directors] are watching us students for students for having fun in a way that they didn’t pre-approve. Like you have to get sneaky with your fun sometimes. Like, what are we, a fucking Catholic school? A lot of people left Catholic schools to come here, so you can’t just be censoring and shoving down everything that everyone does because one person acts like a jackass.

The attempt to do “shenanigans” with a Nerf war and its eventual failure due to administrative intervention clearly angered this student. He felt that if the situation was addressed with more subtlety and nuance, a compromise could have been reached that allowed the students to keep the Nerf war, and the teachers to still teach effectively. The suggestion that students need to get “sneaky” with their fun is an interesting one coming from a longtime student, and was not really backed up by other students I interviewed. Perhaps they were not as frank.

The emphasis on accepting a school climate of goofiness reinforces the value placed on students who perform these behaviors, through the positive reinforcement of laughter and encouragement. Other students see these “shenanigans” receiving praise, and they attempt to imitate those behaviors. This produces a cycle that creates a school climate of joy and whimsicality.

III. Drama

While Leaves overall appears to be a peaceful place, there is still “drama,” or social conflict. However, the amount, type, and intensity of this drama was perceived as different between everyone I interviewed. Notably, no teachers related any information about drama at all, and in a place as small and intimate as Leaves of Learning, one might
expect the teachers to know the student gossip. The main thing students identified as carrying the risk of drama was cliques. Nearly all students denied the presence of cliques, and explicitly explained their usage of the less exclusionary term “groups.” One longtime student summarized many other students opinions about cliques and groups:

There are no cliques at Leaves, there are no distinct groups. Well, there are groups, but groups instead of being like, who are the most popular people and stuff, groups are more broken down into what are things you’re interested in and stuff like that… and it’s hard to even call them groups because they’re always melding together and different people are always going to different places to hang out with everyone. It’s a very kind of homogenous environment, that everyone is kind of flowing together and going to what they’re interested in and following the things they want to do.

The echoing of the sentiment of cliques implying negativity and groups implying practicality was confirmed by another longtime student:

I think everybody is welcoming to new students and I think eventually they get drawn to one particular group of people, like, I don’t want to say clique because clique sort of implies animosity or stratification. People move between these groups at will a lot of the time, but I mean there are groups that people go into at lunch because you can’t really have seventy people having a giant love-in in the gym.

However, students explain that they are noticing more drama, which they correlate with the more rapid incursion of the “school kids.” It is important to note that I cannot
measure whether this is actually happening, but this is what the students perceive as happening. It emphasizes the importance of the insider/outsider dichotomy discussed later in this thesis in understanding the school climate in this setting. One relatively new refugee student explained:

When I first went here, I felt like nothing was going to, nothing could happen. No drama or anything. But the next two years I guess that kind of changed. There’s drama, and just not, it’s starting to feel like public school, kind of like Loveland, but not like…. Mainly because of the newer students. I think the newer students from their schools, from their past schools, I think they bring some of that public school with them, and bring it to Leaves, kind of. Like cussing, kind of inappropriate clothes, drama, and just bringing public school.

The perceived association of drama with “schoolies” as a thing that only happens at school belies the drama that does happen at Leaves. One longtime student explains that some drama is a product of the size of the school.

The other problem I think with the culture I guess is that it’s so small. Everything gets around. You know who has beef with who. I mean luckily I mean there’s not real cliqueness and again, as I said we’re sheltered, so no significant drama goes on, it’s rarely stuff like Ken is sleeping with Julie, but secretly Julie is the drug addicted half brother of so and so….—laughter— You can’t keep any secrets here.

That’s just the way it is.

When the high school numbers less than 100, it seems secrets and privacy become a casualty. People also have very different opinions on the quantity and quality of privacy
at Leaves. One relatively new student said that “you have drama between friends and everything but that doesn’t spread around so…” while another relatively new student described the Leaves social environment as “very open, and there’s not much pressure on you to keep anything a secret because everyone’s okay with everything.” There are also differing opinions on how much drama there is. One male longtime student said that there’s “no negativity,” and one new female student said that she had seen some “complicated relationships” and she had had a “rough start” to the year. When I asked her to explain the difference between her past school and Leaves, she said that at Leaves “There just weren’t really any, little drama, little to no drama, but of course I end up making some…” Her embarrassed tone and self-deprecating humor showed that she knew that drama is not encouraged at Leaves, and that she felt bad about creating it.

When asking about drama in the student body, I came across two dissenting voices in a sea of praise about inclusivity. One was a relatively new female student.

I do kind of wish it was a little bigger, because that’s the only thing, once you meet a certain amount of people like I said before, once people get in that closed friend, it’s a really good and a really bad thing where they get so close that everyone’s so close and tightly knit but if something turns them it’s all like dominoes so then you’re kind of out, so I do wish it was more diverse, there were a few more people and I’m definitely like a bit different from lots of the, not like these specific people but I definitely have like, it’s weird. I have friends that I like to keep, those things that burn quick so I can have, it’s hard to explain. A friend coaster? Maybe if there were more people to talk to and interact with and find
things in common with really. That’s definitely, when it’s smaller it’s kind of
tougher to find that because if they aren’t there then they just aren’t.

This shows that the school climate can also be understood as too insular and close-knit
for comfort. Another relatively new male student explained that students were not always
kind. I asked him how students treated each other:

**Student:** Very nicely for the most part, but there’s a couple times that it’s been,
that they’ve been a little mean, but I don’t think it was intentional, I think it was a
playful kind of mean. But I think overall they’re very respectful and very
understanding.

**Interviewer:** What categories does the playful mean fall into? Is it like gossiping
or pushing or…

**Student:** Somewhat really of roughhousing and sometimes it’s kind of making fun
of them for something.

He qualifies the roughhousing and teasing as unintentional and not mean spirited but
present nonetheless. While only two students spoke about negative social experiences, I
included them to show that the experiences of Leaves students are not universally
positive and idyllic, and that there are problems present in the Leaves of Learning
community. Interviewing specifically students who had negative social experiences at
Leaves would be an interesting avenue for future research.
Physical Space

Physical space is an influencer of school climate, and Leaves of Learning has a rich history of unique physical spaces. The school originated as a very small co-op housed in a greenhouse, grew and moved into the basement of a former dairy barn with a classroom in each stall, outgrew that space and transitioned into an former office building, and finally is now housed in a former Catholic school connected to a Catholic church. I was not present for the greenhouse, but I did join Leaves of Learning when we were housed at the barn. That space was very different from the current space, and did a lot to shape the culture, as one of the directors explains:

We’ve become bigger. I guess for some it feels the same, for some it feels different. I think that our space and size has had a big role in that. We’ve striven to be this warm, embracing community, and it’s easy when you’re all in a barn and you can hear everyone from one end to another, and a tour takes two minutes, and I stand over the tile that’s missing in the art room all the time because I don’t want people to see. It’s easier to feel a part of something in that. And this building is difficult because we’re so far apart. And we’re still working on it, but finding ways for us to connect, to use the boundaries of our structural building.

As the director explains, as Leaves of Learning’s physical environment has grown from the barn to the office building to the Catholic school, worries about becoming more regimented and traditional in terms of education have grown as well. The director addresses these concerns when she said “I like to think that space does not define us, that
we define the space.” However, the building and its functionality did come up very often in interviews with students, teachers, and administrators.

The current Leaves of Learning building has three floors, a gym, a multipurpose room, and many classrooms. When Leaves began its lease, it was full of desks and other marks of the Catholic school that it was, such as crucifixes, bells, and statues of saints. None of those objects align with the material culture that is representative of Leaves, so the teachers and administrators set out to make the space their own. The director tells the story of how they worked to create the physical culture of Leaves:

This space, when we first came here, was terrifying. It was a Catholic school, when you looked in every room there were 30 plus desks lined up, everything was focused on the desk in the front and you just got a whole feeling and vibe and it wasn’t Leaves of Learning. There was no good outdoor space. So the first thing we decided to do, we had two weeks to move in and start classes, was to make it friendly. So we got the desks out, just got them out of there, because a lot of teachers had a reaction to it when they came to see the space as you can imagine... So we tried to soften the spaces by encouraging the teachers to make the space their own. And some spaces were fuzzier and warmer than others, but we gave them the raw materials like tables and chairs instead of desks. We filled the hallways with artwork after a year of being here because… I mean the night before we opened our doors, we were scrambling. There was stuff all over. So we tried to make it look friendly and open and a place you could relax, with soft furnishing, kid friendly things, and make it relaxed.
This conscious creation of a “friendly and open” space, one that is “soft,” “relaxed,” and “kid friendly” is a mark of how teachers and administrators work actively to create the culture. The changing of the physical space from the clearly regimented Catholic school to the “warm” and “fuzzy” is not an accident, it is a conscious attempt to affect school climate by changing the nebulous idea of how a place “feels.” Leaves is covered in photographs of students at play taken at the school that are enlarged and hung along the tops of the walls. I appear in many of them, which was wonderful to see when I returned. The walls are also covered in art that the students have made, signs for future institutional events like the teen dance, pizza lunches, and graduation meetings, and signs that students have created that say things like “check out our beautiful library.” There are old sets from plays hung on the walls and sculptures made from wire, paper mache, and tissue paper hanging from the ceiling. Outside the front door there are giant potted plants. In the outdoor space, there are picnic tables a student made for his Eagle Scout project, benches, trees, grass, and a gaga pit, the arena for a game that involves hitting a ball in a wooden circle. The Leaves of Learning Little Sprouts preschool has a small outdoor play area with a fence around it and a winter garden in which the the preschoolers work. When the weather is warm, students eat lunch outside. For the purposes of this thesis, I have divided the physical environment of Leaves into classroom space and non-classroom space. These spaces function for different purposes, even though they do overlap. For example, some rooms play dual roles as both classrooms and lunchrooms.

With the lack of fixed classrooms and the emphasis on transforming physical space into optimal learning environments, it is natural that teachers had a lot to say about
their classrooms. They described the process of decorating their rooms: adding posters and art that related to their subject matter, creating more accessible and interesting learning spaces, and using the school’s limited technology for lessons. No classrooms have desks, instead they have various combinations of tables and chairs, couches arranged in circles, pillows on the floor, carpet squares to sit on, or beanbag chairs. Teachers discussed using their environments to maximize educational value, putting posters of French irregular verbs and maps of France in the French classroom, and creating many different work stations in the ceramics classroom. Because there are more teachers than rooms, many teachers have roommates. This was described as a source of some tension because of the difficulties inherent in maneuvering around the belongings and teaching aids of other teachers. The “soft” and “kid friendly” classroom spaces make the point that learning should be comfortable, accessible, and geared towards the individual student. By tailoring their spaces in these ways, teachers and administrators promote a school climate of accessible learning.

The Great Hallway Debate

The classrooms are explicitly dedicated to learning and teaching, but I would argue that non-classroom spaces, including the halls and the lunchrooms, serve to educate implicitly about student values and behaviors. Leaves students roam the hallways during lunch, meeting with each other and seeing and being seen. The halls have access to art, on the walls, music, from the pianos and school guitar, sports, through the foosball table, and food, through the vending machine filled with healthy snacks. The halls also communicate messages from the administration to the students by hanging
announcements of future programs, clubs, and rules in the halls. Parents and volunteers act as hall monitors now that Leaves has enough money to give teachers a paid lunch instead of requiring them to do hallway duties.

Leaves of Learning students attach special significance to the halls, and they are the source of one of the biggest recent conflicts between students, teachers, and administrators. In the past, students sat and ate their lunches against the walls in the halls. This became a problem. One longtime teacher explains how sitting in the halls became dangerous not only to the physical environment but also to the social environment:

It became more and more sitting in the halls to the point where the lunch rooms were pretty much empty. And then any time you wanted to go through the hall you were wending your way over lunch bags and and piles of backpacks, and we were having trouble with piles of lunch trash left in the halls, and the other thing is when people are sitting in a row in the hall, they can’t interact with more than one or two people around them, and we were getting a lot of closed off groups and then we were also getting situations where people would try to walk down the hall and conversations would fall silent and they would, you know, it was really uncomfortable. And then we discovered that we were in violation of fire code -laughter- which we decided to turn into a good thing, and we now have some more spaces including, we use the multipurpose room at lunch time now, so we can have multi age groups sitting there and people can be in groups separate from each other, but they’re more round groups, so they’re more inclusive as opposed to being in a line, and we also have all the lunchrooms where people can be with
their own age groups. And I think a lot of people don’t like it, they want to be in the hall, which I don’t really understand. I don’t know what’s so exciting about the hall. It’s not like they can’t still sit on the floor, but…. That would be a case where it would have been nice to be able to have a whole conversation where these are the problems we’re having, and here is what’s going on and that… But at that point it kind of becomes unwieldy. Fifteen years ago there might have been a conversation between Diana and the kids about it, when we were smaller.

This quote makes clear the reasons against the hallway ban, namely, that it made the space dirty, the building less safe, and the social world more structured. While teachers seem to understand and rationalize the administrative decision to ban eating in the hallways, students were not convinced. They saw this decision as harsh, unnecessary, and a marker of Leaves becoming more “schoolie.” When I asked students about the rules of Leaves of Learning, they talked about eating in the halls. One student described the rules at Leaves of Learning as “Just not being mean to anybody and no disrupting your class basically, that’s about it. You can walk anywhere, but you can’t sit in the halls anymore.”

It seems to be an issue that preys on the students minds. When I asked one student what had changed about Leaves, she replied “When I first came here, first of all, I miss eating in the hallways and eating wherever you want to, because you could eat in the corner where nobody sits and eat and read, and now you have to sit around other people.”

Another student agreed, she found privacy hard to find in the teen lunchrooms and thought it was
nicker to sit down in the halls because you get to talk without there being people around you, so if you sit down here there are always people around you... so we walk around. For my sister, she sat in the halls, and she’s an introvert so she’s not really a big talkative person and she has her one group of friends, and they would sometimes eat in the teen lunchroom also but then it got really crowded and she didn’t want to eat in there.

Now the students roam the halls instead of sitting in them to get away from the admittedly high levels of noise and shenanigans in the Leaves of Learning lunchrooms. For their parts, the administrators took a lighthearted approach to the Great Hallway Debate. I talked to the director about it and she said:

One thing we did... is we had kids lining the hallways at lunch, and becoming very clique-y. A new student would walk down a hall into a corner and sit with people, and it felt really awkward walking in the middle of all these people watching at lunchtime, it became really bad. And sitting on the floor... So we took it away, and the kids were upset about it, and I explained that if we were a typical school we’d put you all in that cafeteria, we’d have one teacher, and you wouldn’t be allowed to talk. They got it, and I said trust, we thought about this, trust that we aren’t making arbitrary rules. And I had some kids who were really strong, and it did make me feel good that that’s all they had to rebel against.

The director again was working to shape the cultural climate through enforcing a new rule. She attempted to counteract what she saw as cliquey behavior with the addition of a rule. The students were displeased and petitioned against it, but the hubbub around it
seemed to be dying down. The example of eating lunch in the halls is what seems like a semi-rare occurrence of teachers, administrators and students disagreeing about how to form and nurture their school climate. Students tried to shape it one way by eating in the halls, which was perceived by the teachers and administrators as a potential threat to the school climate and forbidden.

I argue that the physical space of Leaves of Learning implicitly teaches students how the school expects them to behave and what they are expected to value. The focus on free expression, art, and comfortable, “safe,” and “friendly” learning environments exemplifies the values and priorities of Leaves of Learning, and shapes their school climate in a cyclical, self-reinforcing way.

**Student and Teacher Relationships**

After examining how both the composition of the student body and the physical environment affects school climate, we turn our attention to the relationship between teachers and students to help address the question of how Leaves of Learning members teach each other to be members of this community. I recognized several common threads in descriptions of these interactions: students and teachers respect and have overall positive feelings toward each other, often in a specifically familial way, and teachers actively work to integrate new students in ways that go above and beyond the call of duty.
Respect and Admiration

The first piece of understanding the dynamic between teachers and students is examining how each party feels about the other. I found that there is generally mutual respect and admiration between students and teachers. Teachers said of the students: “I get to spend all this time with kids who are really engaged talking about stuff that I love and bringing them on board... It’s just a slice of heaven, I mean, it’s amazing that I get paid to do this!” Another new teacher said “I love working here, I missed it all break, I’m like oh I’m so happy to get to see the kids today!” A third showed her respect for the students by respecting their knowledge: “There are students at Leaves who are significantly younger than me that I’ve learned a lot of stuff from. So when students ask me something I don’t know and then one of them knew it, I would send them to them just the same as I would, I don’t know, go ask [the chemistry teacher] because I don’t know anything about chemistry.” The teachers genuinely appreciate their students, describing them as “joyful,” “energetic,” “engaged,” “creative” and “extraordinary.” The students echo these sentiments, describing their teachers as “you feel like they’re your friend but they’re also your teacher so you can respect them like a teacher but you also feel like you could talk to them like a friend,” “welcoming,” “very open to ideas,” “very much a two way relationship,” “very fair, and they all listen to your needs,” “teachers are there to help you” and “teachers really try to take the students seriously and really feel, really engaged with the students more than just delivering the curriculum as rote.” This shapes
school climate by creating an established mutuality of student teacher appreciation, who have very clear love and respect for each other.

*Family dynamics*

This dynamic can be traced at least in part to the fact that so many Leaves teachers are the parents of the students. Many students have parents who are staff members or administrators, and they explain that they appreciate the teachers so much because they see how hard their own parents work. For example, one student’s mother is a math teacher and he said “Teachers really make a personal effort to engage the students, and I see this in all my classes and I know it really well, since my mom teaches here I know the teacher struggle…” Being related to the teachers and understanding the work they do to engage their students fosters more respect towards the teachers, not just for the children of teachers, but for all students through the process of student directed social policing. Another child of a teacher explained

I guess the one area where I am sometimes sad is when I see students that don’t treat teachers very well. I see that every now and then. That makes me very sad because I see these teachers, from knowing how much work teachers put into this with my dad being a teacher and me seeing him throwing away entire summers just to get his curriculum ready for the next year, it kind of frustrates me when I see that. But I don’t see that often.

This frustration with students who do not appreciate the hard work of the teachers fosters a school climate of mutual respect between students and teachers.
Besides the literal familial relationship students and teachers often have, there is also a more nebulous family structure in place. According to one teacher:

I think there’s a little bit of a family dynamic that starts to emerge here, much more so than you would see in a traditional school, I think. And that’s not just teachers and students but the students bond another way, but there’s a sense of belonging to each other and supporting each other that is not universal, obviously there are certain people who aren’t going to enter into that but I think it’s a little bit of both. And I also say family in the sense of, not that everybody gets along happily because that’s not what families are. Families are people who feel bound to each other and so there are certain people that you naturally belong with but there’s other people that might rub you the wrong way but you try to sort of get past that, and find the good and come alongside, and I see that a little bit more here than in a traditional school.

Understanding the relationships between students and teachers as a familial one is a mental frame that accepts and even welcomes conflict, viewing it as natural and nonthreatening. This framework also explains the trust that teachers and students have in each other by grounding their relationship in ideas of permanence, stability, and acceptance. The director also explains the dynamic this way:

I would describe it as a big family, with all the ages, with older kids looking after younger kids and younger kids looking up to older kids, which is more normal than having a big peer group, and I think in a big peer group they make their own hierarchy among their own peer group, but this has a more natural feel.
Sometimes when kids come in, as you know, the little ones are looking terrified of these huge teenagers. And then they realize that they’re here to help them, and then they relax.

In her frame, the family is the students, with the older students as the parental figures and the younger students as the child figures. This language of family used to explain how community members relate to each other is both a literal and a figurative one that allows students and teachers to place trust in each other and in the permanence of their bond, which fosters tolerance of each other’s idiosyncrasies.

Continuing the family metaphor, there are naturally conflicts and less universally adored members. Between some students and particular teachers there is conflict about teaching materials, curriculum, and rigidity of rules. Some students are rebellious against the authority of the more senior community members. For example, one relatively new student complained about the attitude of the administrative staff, saying “But honestly what I would change is how the main staff, like the principle and the assistant principal and the counselor... I would probably change how they look at the students.” This vague criticism was not explained despite follow up questions, but it is one of only two pieces of negative feedback I received about teachers and administrators. The other was dislike of a particular teacher and questioning of their teaching ability. One longtime student said illustratively about this dynamic: “there’s only like two teachers, like two or three teachers who are pretty much always called by Mr. or Mrs in front of their names. There’s just a familiarity you wouldn’t see anywhere else. There’s a real friendliness. There isn’t any teacher who everybody hates, I mean, there’s a teacher who nobody
particularly likes, but….” The student went on to explain that he found this teacher’s use of worksheets excessive and their skirting of politically controversial issues in class to be morally lacking. However, the vast majority of opinions about teachers were rosy.

Having families that include both teachers and students attend and teach at Leaves of Learning creates a school climate with a distinct familial atmosphere.

Teacher assistance

The teachers at Leaves of Learning perform a valuable service to the students and culture. Besides educating their students, teachers also work to maintain the culture of inclusion. In many subtle ways, the teachers at Leaves of Learning help to integrate new students into the culture. The vast majority of teachers I interviewed mentioned integrative tasks they did offhandedly and without prompting, explaining it as “their job.” For example, one teacher explained:

That is one thing as far as rules, there’s one rule that’s assigned to teachers too, and volunteers and everything. Diana feels that it’s very important to make sure everyone is included and involved. One of the things that’s part of our job is to keep an eye out for the kids that don’t seem to be integrating into the program, that aren’t sort of making friends, and aren’t participating, and help find ways that we can help them become part of the program and feel like they’re included and participate at whatever level they want to participate at.
Teachers notice a student who is not integrating successfully and then either cue other students to talk to them or suggest groups of other students for the new student to join.

One teacher explained how this process works:

As you get to know the kids a little you try to find other kids with common interests or a similar personality and you try to think who they would get along with, and you try to give them something to do together. Or a lot of times we’ll ask the current Leaves kid, who’s been there for longer, to try to go talk to this Leaves kid, and did you know that you guys both like this, and she hasn’t made very many friends yet, and maybe you could go start a conversation with her about that. See if you can help her meet some other people.

This dual part process of helping students to find common interests and then engage with each other is the first step in the process of teacher assisted integration. Another teacher described the second step that she tries to help the students take:

I think one of the things that we’re working on, or at least that I’ve been talking to some people to, the kids can be really really tolerant and accepting but really helping them really take the next step of reaching out and how to be actively inclusive. Because they are really inclusive but it’s taking that next step to help kids that are maybe a little bit shyer or new and that kind of thing.

Fine tuning the adjustment process and reminding students to continue reaching out seems to be the second part of the integrative process. The teachers also work to be sensitive to students who may be introverted. A few of them emphasized the importance of assessing if a student was eating lunch alone because they were not socially
succeeding or if they were eating alone because they were introverts and required time alone to recharge. Of course, the teacher-assisted integration process does not always work, which a longtime teacher expressed to me ruefully: “Watching students not thrive is really difficult. And reaching out and reaching out and reaching out and reaching out and not surmounting those challenges. Not very often, but it happens.” This shows that some students do not fit into Leaves. An interesting avenue for further research could be finding and interviewing students for whom Leaves of Learning was not a good fit.

Watching out for students who are not integrating effectively and intervening for them is a step outside of traditional teacher duties, but some teachers go above and beyond even that to help students integrate. One longtime teacher and parent organizes summer park meet ups for students to gather with their friends during times when school is not in session:

Most summers now we have between four and six summer park days, depending on our personal commitments we try to plan two a month, and it’s really fantastic, we have the current families come, we have families that have left Leaves but still want to stay connected, they come to the park days, and we have lots of new families who will email me privately and say should we really come and meet people? Or “we’re thinking, we’re prospective families, we’re thinking about coming to Leaves.” and we encourage them to come and see if this is a good fit for them.

This initiative draws many people, and while the students are playing at the park, the teacher relates to the parents on a parental level. This makes the parents feel welcomed
while their student takes the opportunity to connect and integrate pre-emptively before the school year even begins. The school climate is shaped in a positive and inclusive way before students even begin their education at Leaves of Learning through off the clock efforts of teachers and parents.

**Orienteers Program**

Leaves of Learning also has a formal inclusivity initiative. The Leaves of Learning Orienteers is a program that matches current Leaves kids with incoming students. It is a student-created and student-run initiative designed specifically and explicitly to integrate new students into the culture. I created this program during my high school days at Leaves of Learning, and it is still ongoing. Current students and new students both fill out a questionnaire asking about their levels of introversion and extroversion, interests, and hobbies. Then, the student in charge of the Orienteers matches new and old students based on these expressed preferences. Each Orienteer is in charge of making sure that their new student feels welcome. I spoke with the current Orienteer leader and she said this about the program:

Well, [another student] and I this year, we’re the Orienteer team leaders so that’s really one of my biggest roles at Leaves. So being able to make sure that the new students are settling in, that’s what I consider my biggest role, making sure they feel as accepted and welcomed as I did because I was personally very scared coming here, it was a very big school, like my school was about the size of these
two classrooms and it was just one floor, so it was very very small. So just making sure that everyone feels welcomed and accepted and free to be who they are without judgement.

As a former timid new student, this student works from a place of understanding and empathy to help integrate the new students. While coming from a place of good intentions, occasionally there are issues and errors with the program. One of the administrators explained a difficult start at the beginning of the school year, where old and new students were “segregated”:

I talked with our orienteers, who don’t... [one of the teachers is] going to do a class with them because they don’t quite understand. They come and say hi, I’m Billy, what are you doing? And then they’re like okay, I’ve done my job! If you want to sit with us some time, you can! Not like, who are you, they didn’t find out who these people are because they want to be with their friends, and talk with them. This person didn’t offer them anything immediately, so I challenged a few of the Orientees and brought it to their attention that they were needed. So I think that that’s a big part of my job. And then realizing that they weren’t getting it, I talked with [one of the teachers], she’s taking a class on this very kind of thing, so she’s going to meet with the orientees and talk about them, and that’s going to be a part of the program that you started.

This student gap in understanding and effort is something that the administration steps in to fill. As a student run program, it is hard to make sure that the Orientees program is functioning at peak efficiency because there are no built-in mechanisms to ensure
accountability. The administrator continued, discussing efforts to make sure that the program is creating more good than potential harm:

We kind of make the criteria to say “you will be talking to people” because we get some awkward matches where they come in and say nothing, and that’s almost worse because the expectation is that this person is going to be helping you! So it can feel rejecting. So we’re working on that. So that’s my biggest role. And all the other things would happen if I left. But that’s the biggest one. And I always feel such disappointment when there’s a student who doesn’t make it socially and doesn’t feel reached out to. That’s just a big crime. I don’t want to become any bigger, because I wouldn’t be able to keep tabs on it, and we’re just at that point where it’s difficult.

I found it especially interesting that she described helping with student social integration as her biggest role, and in fact the most important of her roles. The director of a school generally has other things to do that they might find more important than the social lives of their students, but the fact that this was not so speaks to the school climate of inclusion this school promotes so strongly.

While the Orienteer program has its hiccups, it is still an authentic and proactive attempt to help the new students to understand and feel welcome in the culture and to help the old students protect the culture at Leaves. The fact that Leaves has organically created a means of explicit cultural transmission that is of the students and by the students is a very good indicator that a great deal of this cultural transmission is intentional and thoughtful. This is a definite student run way that students teach each
other how to be “Leaves kids.” They do it through the Orienteers, self-policing, participating in joyful activities and modeling appropriate relationships with other community members.

The Self-Conception of Leaves of Learning

The relationship between students and teachers is something Leaves of Learning prides itself on. In this section, I will explore the ways Leaves of Learning understands itself, through looking at its views of the outside world, views of itself, and how these processes and perspectives create and reinforce the school climate.

First, I will survey the various opinions of Leaves of Learning community members on non-Leaves of Learning schools. Leaves of Learning has a strong sense of in-group solidarity and tends to view the outside world as just that, the outside world. I received a few pieces of positive and neutral feedback when I asked about previous educational experiences: stories of interesting arts programs, decent Montessori schools, and better technology and facilities at outside schools. However, the vast majority of responses I received when I asked about previous educational experiences were negative stories of previous schools and positive stories of Leaves of Learning. According to one teacher, in public school parents are “either non-existent because they don't care about their kid’s work, that lack of parental involvement which is largely seen as a systemic problem in Cincinnati Public, or sort of parents being helicopter parents, like at Walnut Hills being too involved and being a pain and that's just not how it is here.” Other homeschooling centers are too “prissy” and “too small,” and private schools are “hostile
and competitive,” according to students. Public schools are, according to Leaves students, boring, full of bullies, hierarchical, cold, and full of arbitrary rules. Students are not the only ones who hold these views, many teachers echoed these sentiments as well.

Interestingly, many students who have these opinions have never actually gone to public school. The idea of public school and all that it represents is reviled even by students who have never attended a traditional school. For example, one lifelong homeschooler said to me:

I’ve gone here for so long and I don’t have a lot to relate to other environments and stuff like that, and then I’ll go to other people and other places, like other schools and stuff like that if I’m visiting them, and I’ll be like “why is everyone here so cold and weird and stuff?” And I realize “no wait, Leaves is the weird one!” It’s exceptionally welcoming and warming, and it’s a really great environment, and I’m always trying to not take it for granted and be grateful for being able to be here with the people that are here.

To me, the sharing of the distrust and general negativity towards public school seems like an act of solidarity with their bullied friends, as well as a convenient in-group/out-group delineation mechanism. Because the longtime homeschoolers have often not been to a public school, they understand the contrast between Leaves and public school as very black and white, namely that public schools are bad and mean and hurt your friends, and Leaves is good and nice and supports your friends. In many ways, this feels true for them, especially for the self-selected population at Leaves: people for whom the public
education system ranges between ineffective and traumatizing. One teacher explained that after students graduate,

They bring the spirit of Leaves with them because they don’t care what people think, because they weren’t mutilated all through their school. I know so many kids that I feel like I don’t really know them, and I don’t mean here at Leaves, outside of Leaves a lot of teenagers that I know I think I don’t really know because there’s such a wall around you as a human being because they’ve gone through the school system and it’s not even the school system as in the education system, it’s the social aspect of the school system which is just so difficult. I feel like it took me forever to unpack a lot of it. And so to know what you actually are as a human... I think kids get that chance to do that here at Leaves.

This teacher explains that in her understanding, the public school system often “mutilates” students, who are forced to build walls around their vulnerable selves in order to survive. She relates it to her own experiences in public school, explaining that it took her “forever to unpack it.” This could be taken as either as a teacher passing on their baggage around public education, or as an educator who is able to relate to students and show both sympathy and empathy for students because of shared experiences. Her closing idea of Leaves as a place people go to become more fully human is a very indicative one of the general thought surrounding what kind of a place Leaves is and should be.

Complementing the almost universally rejected idea of public school is a great deal of expressed superiority about Leaves, its learning environment, lack of bullies, and
excellent teachers. One student explained that in contrast to public school, the people are
very nice at Leaves, and

the more that you hang out with us and the more that you’re in the environment
and the more that you kind of, the more that you have a stabilized life because
public school can be a little bit wonky at times. I think it’s just having a stable
environment, having classes you actually want to take instead of classes you have
to take, and then also having people who really do want to be your friend and
really are very welcoming to have in a group, and yeah, I think that really helps
you get to be someone who goes to Leaves.

This student contrasts Leaves with public school, a place where it is inferred that things
are “wonky,” unstable, academically uninteresting, unfriendly, and insincere. Students
are also aware of the Leaves of Learning administrators functioning to make teaching
more effective, which they explained by contrasting it with public education.

All teachers at Leaves want to help and they don’t even have like, I know a lot of
more traditional schools the teacher can get in trouble if the students aren’t getting
good grades in their class, whereas there’s nothing like that hanging over the
heads of teachers at Leaves. They’re not having to turn in a thing like the public
school system.

This frame lifts up the Leaves of Learning teachers because they teach well without
threats hanging over their heads while simultaneously degenerating public school for
being the kind of place that punishes teachers for the poor grades of the students. This
feeds into the idea of Leaves superiority and the demonization of public school. A very
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Illustrative quote from a longtime homeschooler echoes this sentiment when addressing the changes Leaves has undergone:

Because I can be sitting here being like Leaves of Learning has more segregated groups and sometimes I feel like people are only hanging out with their group of friends, and then I go to public school and I’m like “well at least it’s not that.”-laughter- At least it’s light years above that, and I have to be grateful for that, knowing that we have lots of good things as well that trump all the bad things.

This standpoint, while making students and other participants feel satisfied and happy with their school choice, is a clear indicator of the privilege found in Leaves of Learning. The fact that these students can afford to go to a school that costs a great deal of tuition and requires parents to either arrange childcare for the days that Leaves does not meet or be a stay at home parent explains the touch of privileged smugness inherent in this fear and distrust of the outside world. However, one teacher described the bubble and her own privilege in a very nuanced and self-aware way:

When we left public school it was a real moral dilemma for me, being a public school teacher, being convinced of public school education, I felt personally like we were kind of jumping ship, and so I worry a lot about public schools. It’s somewhat hypocritical, basically sending my child to a private school. There are some issues there that we were trying to resolve and couldn’t get resolved for him, and decided that the best course was to go a different direction and it was difficult. So one of the things I do recognize is that Leaves is a privileged environment, and we are not compelled to serve all students. I think we try really
really hard to do that, but it is a different environment. I think that’s a challenge for us and I think it’s a challenge because we have kids like any place coming with a whole host of different needs. Some of those we’re better equipped to handle than others.

Recognizing that Leaves is a privileged environment and, as she says, is not compelled to serve all students like a public school shows an awareness of both the positive and negative implications of a self-selected learning environment. Leaves is able to serve the students it serves well, but the predominantly rich, predominantly white students do not get the opportunity to interact with other students who attend the reviled public schools. This does not allow Leaves students to check their privilege and gain perspective about structural issues more visible in public school, such as inequalities of race, class, and gender. This shapes the school climate in a way that reinforces the dominant narratives of the inferiority of public education and the exceptionality of the students at Leaves.

While expressing gratitude for the benefits of Leaves of Learning, the privileged sentiment that the student quoted above expressed of “at least it’s not that” is a common one at Leaves of Learning. The public school system is often invoked as a sort of bogeyman to frighten students into behaving. I know that when I misbehaved when I was younger my parents threatened to send me to public school. When quelling unrest about the Great Hallway Debate, the director said “So we took it away, and the kids were upset about it, and I explained that if we were a typical school we’d put you all in that cafeteria, we’d have one teacher, and you wouldn’t be allowed to talk.” This approaches threatens students who dissent with the way Leaves is, in their opinion, changing, with the specter
of public school, invoking the ideas of rigid rules, authority figures, and a quelling of expression and noise. This stands in juxtaposition with Leaves’ self-conception as a place that is more loosely and humanely structured, where everyone respects everyone else, and where all members of the community are allowed to flourish in their own ways.

I hold that these mechanisms, the fear and distrust of the outside world, the understanding of Leaves as superior, and the privilege of living in Leaves as a bubble are very effective ways to maintain and create culture and community. The common cultural understanding that reaches across age to permeate teachers, administrators, and students holds that Leaves is a safe place, a refuge and haven from the boring, dangerous, and in a visceral way, dirty public school system. This understanding helps the Leaves community to appreciate each other, recognize the unique ways their culture functions, and be very intentional about protecting it from the clearly defined threat of the outside world.

Creating the clear and inclusive in-group of Leaves Members and the out-group of Everyone Else is effective in binding the community together, saving them from making out-groups in Leaves. Perhaps this phenomenon of having essentially a common enemy works as an escape valve and helps guard against bullying behavior in the students.

Conclusion

Many researchers have attempted to define what a positive school climate consists of, but examinations of the process that creates school climate are few and far between. Unlike Narvaez and Lapsley, I did not find that the teachers were the driving force between school climate creation. While of course all participants in the culture of the
school helped to shape it in different ways, I found that the main force for a positive school climate is the student body. They understand the school climate as precious, intentional, and needing protection. The students at Leaves of Learning police new students who might shift the culture in negative ways. They worry about behaviors students associate with public school, which is seen as a bogeyman by Leaves of Learning students. Teachers, administrators and students all viewed welcoming new students and integrating them into the community as their job, and conscientiously worked to make sure new students felt welcome. There is a clear sense of in-group and out-group at Leaves of Learning, but the in-group is essentially the entire school, and the out-group is the outside world. This is another way Leaves maintains cultural adhesion.

The physical environment shapes the culture at Leaves of Learning as well. A lot of attention is paid to the way a space feels, and making the learning environment optimal for all learners. All in all, the creation of the school climate at Leaves of Learning is intentional, cooperative, and explicit. School climate is not left to chance, it is cultivated by the entire school who believe that it is their job to welcome and integrate new students, and to respect and learn from each other.

The implications of creating a positive school climate are linked to better outcomes for students (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009) and can help prevent negative outcomes (Schultz, 2002). It would be a fruitful avenue for future research to study the outcomes of Leaves of Learning alumni and see if the positive school climate led to these specified outcomes. Other areas for future study include finding and interviewing students for whom Leaves of Learning was not a successful fit,
or conducting research on the growing transgender and gender nonconforming populations at Leaves of Learning.

**Limitations**

Like all research, this study has its limitations. Because I interviewed only teachers, administrators and students, and not parents, I may have missed a critical piece of information about how Leaves of Learning functions. Also, because I did not collect demographic information, I could have missed information that the data could have given if analyzed by race, class, and gender. These markers did not seem tremendously relevant to a study of how school climate is created in an essentially racially, politically and socioeconomically homogenous school environment. Impact limitations include the strong regional focus of this study. Because there is only one Leaves of Learning, and I did not undertake a comparison study, the relevance of this thesis could be reduced. However, because there is no other literature that I found on the creation of school climate in alternative educational settings, this research is still useful and important. Because I had a limited amount of research participants, 15 students, 8 teachers and 5 administrators, data may be underpowered and incomplete. The data also came from an almost exclusively white set of participants. However, because Leaves of Learning only has around 250 students and 40 teachers, and most of them are white, I argue that this sample set is more indicative than may originally appear.

Because this study focused only on one school site and focused on the internal workings of it, it may be difficult to generalize. However, the novelty of this study and its
findings vis a vis the potentially reproducible aspects of student/teacher interaction, administrative decision-making priorities and active cultural protection by all parties involved are relevant and important to all educational facilities interested in improving their school climate.

**Suggestions for school climate improvement**

Other schools can draw lessons from Leaves of Learning in shaping their school climate. When attempting to create a positive school climate, it is incredibly important to have engaged students who care about the school. Giving students additional agency and creating an atmosphere where they feel trusted, valued, and respected can lead to greater buy-in from the students. Creating a strong sense of pride and identity in the school will lead to greater engagement as well. It seems that it is effective to develop an in-group that is the entire school standing in solidarity against something else. This could, and perhaps should be a nebulous outside force such as “people who do not want our students to succeed,” to avoid the accidental creation of prejudice. The effect of having a common goal and something to shape group identity against seems very effective in creating school climate.

I also hold that in order to create a positive school climate, teachers need to develop positive relationships with their students, and work to integrate new students. I recognize that teachers are not paid enough to complete even a fraction of the work they already do, so addressing the system that devalues the labor of teachers would be a fruitful avenue to improving school climate across the nation. Administrators need to
position themselves in solidarity with their students, not in opposition to them in order to create a positive school climate. It also seems that dispensing with petty rules and trusting the students more will help them to blossom.

The good thing about most of these suggestions stemming from my work with Leaves of Learning is that they are free. Altering school climate does not have to be costly or difficult, it can be as simple as holding assemblies, softening attitudes towards students, interacting with them in positive ways, and allowing them to have agency in their learning processes.

Through trusting, valuing and respecting students, the students will create a more positive school climate, allowing them to avoid feelings of disconnect and the associated negative outcomes and grow more fully and effectively as students, and as people.
References


Appendix A

New students
1. Tell me how you ended up at Leaves.
2. What are the people like here?
3. What’s different about Leaves compared to your old school?
4. What would you say is different and strange about being here? Could you describe the culture to me?
5. How do people act towards you as a new person?
6. Can you describe how this school wants its students to behave?
7. How do you know?
8. How do people act towards each other here?

Old students
1. How did you end up at Leaves? How long have you been going here?
2. What are people like here?
3. What do you think makes Leaves special?
4. Can you describe the culture of Leaves to me?
5. Has Leaves changed since you’ve been here? In what ways?
6. How do students treat each other? How do teachers treat students?
7. How do you and your friends react when there’s a new person? Do you have any worries or are you excited?

Teachers/Administrators
1. What are the students like here? Do they share certain characteristics?
2. How would you describe the culture at Leaves?
3. Who at Leaves shapes the culture?
4. Do you try to teach your students things beyond the academic curriculum, like values, morals or behaviors? How do you do that?
5. Tell me about the process that happens when a new student arrives. How are they integrated into the culture, or are they?
6. What do you think your part is in shaping the school culture?
7. Walk me through how you decided to arrange and decorate your room.